Postmodern Principles: In Search of ???

BY OLIVIA GUDE

An infinite amount of time is wasted in misdirected effort because tradition has a strong hold...

—Arthur Wesley Dow, 1920

The 100th Anniversary issue of *School Arts* magazine explained the roots of today's elements and principles of design in the work of the early 20th-century art educator, Arthur Wesley Dow (Walkup, 2001). The article described Dow's commitment to teaching students to apply formal principles to all aspects of the "fine arts" as well as the objects and environments of everyday life. The article trumpeted Dow's influence on great American modernists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz. A headline for a companion article on the teaching of elements and principles in today's schools proudly announced, "According to a recent NAEA survey, teaching understanding of the elements and principles of design is the *major curriculum goal* [emphasis added] for art teachers at the beginning of the 21st century" (*School Arts*, 2001).

When visiting K-12 school art programs, I rarely see meaningful connections being made between these formal descriptors and understanding works of art or analyzing the quality of everyday design. I ponder the piles of exercises on line, shape, or color harmonies left behind by hundreds and hundreds of students each year. I wonder why what is still considered by many to be the appropriate organizing content for the foundations of 21st century art curriculum is but a shadow of what was modern, fresh, and inspirational 100 years ago.

The elements and principles?

The elements and principles of art are enshrined in most art education textbooks today (Crystal Productions, 2000; Hobbs & Salome, 1995; Ragans, 2000; Wachlowiak and Clements, 2000). Note the shift from elements of *design* to elements of *art*.[1] These elements and principles are proffered as universal and foundational.[2] The definite article *the* suggests that these lists propose to be more than attempts to present a descriptive vocabulary of observed form. They are not presented as *some* vocabulary words or concepts that have been identified as useful for constructing art or interpreting the work of others. The elements and principles are presented as the essence of artmaking. If not literally engraved in stone, the big seven (elements) + seven (principles) are reified in print, achieving theoretical unity, not through persuasive argument, but through seemingly endless repetition in formally oriented textbooks or, during the last decade, as government-mandated standards.

APPROPRIATION: Students recycled catalog images to create Surrealist characters who comment on consumer culture. *Spoiled Brat* by high school student Tiffani McDuffy created at Spiral Workshop 2001. Photo courtesy of University of Illinois at Chicago.

If one consults a number of classic modernist texts about teaching art and design, such as Arthur Wesley Dow's *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers* (1920), Johannes Itten's *Design and Form: the Basic Course at the Bauhaus* (1964), or Maurice de Sausmarez's *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form* (1971), the now familiar 7 + 7 are not found. There is no single, agreed-upon set of terms or constituent elements of the visual in these books. Instead, various structures of organization are proposed with different emphases, principles, and suggested areas for investigation.

There is some degree of overlap among these lists as they all attempt to systematically record visual concepts useful to artists, teachers, and critics when drawing attention to and analyzing various formal features of a work of art or design. Each author presents his own vision of contemporary art teaching and the visual examples accompanying these texts are often quite beautiful and unique. Whether embodying the graceful dignity of an Arts and Crafts sensibility, idiosyncratic early modernism, or hip sixties chic, the student examples in these works differ greatly from the listless lines and uninteresting color schemes resulting from contemporary textbook art exercises.

Many of these modernist texts also differ sharply from their deracinated contemporary cousins in that they contain culturally specific aesthetic references, such as Dow's promotion of *notan* (a Japanese word denoting the balance between flat planes of light and dark) or Itten's references to the philosophy of traditional Chinese painting (Dow, 1920; Green & Poesch, 1999; Itten, 1964). In many contemporary art education textbooks, the art of "others" is often utilized to illustrate various elements and principles. The artworks are viewed and understood using the streamlined 7 + 7 Euro-American system of describing form, therefore students often do not learn the aesthetic context of making and valuing inherent to the artists and communities who actually created the works.

This ungrounded and highly problematic use of the art of "others" is almost inevitable in classrooms that use 7 + 7 concepts as a foundational curriculum structure because the modernist philosophy of elements and principles privileges formalist Western conceptions over other ways to value and understand art. For example, in the introduction to his classic work *Composition*, Dow (1920/1997) makes slighting remarks about art that is "only storytelling" (p. 64). The well-meaning teacher who uses art from diverse cultures to illustrate 7 + 7 concepts sincerely attempts to infuse multiculturalism into a mono-cultural curriculum structure. Unfortunately, this only succeeds in modeling for students that the art of other cultures can be ahistorically appropriated for current uses of Western, ostensibly neutral, educational and aesthetic systems.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) defines *principle* as "fundamental truth, law, or motive force." From the perspective of 21st century aesthetic theory, the notion of ascribing fundamental truth to any visual form seems naïve and uninformed (Wallis, 1984). Early 20th-century art critical language described authentic meaning as arising from the purely formal aspects of artmaking (Harrison & Wood, 1992). Today discussions of the meaning of art, including modern and contemporary

a 21st Century Art Education

abstract art, are more likely to center on the context within which the art was made and seen and the cultural codes the artist chooses to reference and manipulate (Riemschneider & Grosenick, 1999). The notion of hermetic artistic experiences in which meaning is created in direct formal communication between artist and audience is no longer considered a credible explanation of how meaning in visual art is generated and communicated.

Form-based teaching, originating with traditions such as the German Bauhaus and modernist American art educators such as Dow, was not originally conceived of as preliminary to in-depth artistic investigations. When Paul Klee asked students to do a line exercise, it was not because he felt they should learn markmaking before doing more meaningful art. Rather, it was because Klee was excited about the meaning of line. In the spirit of those times, students were asked to make the radical move to eschew what was then seen as extra-visual elements such as narrative and instead explore the deep spiritual and social energy released by abstract art.

Dow advocated a new system of art education he believed would bring to the student "an increase of creative power" (1920/1997, p. 65). But 75 years have passed since he wrote those words. We owe it to our field and our students to study the art of our times and to begin, as Dow did, with probing questions and far-reaching goals. What do our students need to know to understand the art of many cultures, from the past and the 21st century? Today, what knowledge do students need to stimulate and increase their creative powers?

I knew that a curriculum based on the bland and formal 7 + 7 would not engender in teen artists the commitment to get out of bed on chilly Saturday mornings.

Founding Principles

In 1995, I planned the first Spiral Workshop, the University of Illinois at Chicago's Saturday art classes for teens. I looked for ways to articulate to the preservice teachers who would become the workshop faculty, some guiding principles for developing our curriculum. I did not consider using the elements and principles of design because I wanted the young teachers to experience the thrill of teaching youth in a way that would inspire impassioned artmaking. I knew that a curriculum based on the bland and formal 7 + 7 would not engender in teen artists the commitment to get out of bed on chilly Saturday mornings. I wanted an art curriculum that could survive without a compulsory attendance policy to back it up.

Inspired by the spirit though not the content of modern art education, I wanted the Spiral Workshop curriculum to give students a sense of participating in the unfolding of contemporary culture.[3] Students in a quality art education program gain the capacity to reflect on cultural issues related to self and society. Through studying and making art, students become attuned to nuance and complexity. They learn to recognize the cultural choices that underlie even the most mundane moments and actions of everyday life and consider whether these are the choices they themselves wish to make.

Spiral Workshop evolved three criteria for our curriculum:

- **curriculum based on generative themes** that relate to the lives of students and their communities;
- **studio art projects based on diverse practices** of *contemporary* artmaking and related traditional arts;
- **art as investigation**—understanding the art of others and seeing their own artmaking, not as exercises, but as research that produces new visual and conceptual insights.

In 2000, I was appointed a Great Cities Faculty Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The Great Cities Institute's mission is to improve the quality of life in metropolitan Chicago and other urban areas. I was pleased that my colleagues from urban planning and the social sciences shared my vision of the importance of art education to a democratic society. My project for the year was the Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative (CCCI). The CCCI introduced inservice teachers to the Spiral Workshop philosophy and created working partnerships between art teachers and contemporary artists. The projects developed by these groups were taught in area schools and the resulting curriculum was showcased at a student art and curriculum show at the university gallery.[4]

Recently, as I prepared a lecture summarizing my Great Cities research, I surveyed 5 years of Spiral Workshop curriculum as well as the 25 projects created by the CCCI participant teachers. I had originally structured my talk to focus on the social themes that emerged in the youths' artwork when I noticed other commonalities linking the projects. A common vocabulary could be used to describe various visual and conceptual strategies in the students' artworks and in the contemporary professional artworks on which they were modeled. I also noticed that the traditional 7 + 7 elements and principles vocabulary could not adequately describe these artworks.

Originally, I identified 15 categories or principles that described the students' artwork and related contemporary art practices. Noticing the criss-crossing and overlapping similarities of some of the categories, I have since edited and consolidated the list to highlight eight important postmodern artmaking practices. These "newly discovered" postmodern principles are often the fusion of a visual form and a conceptual artmaking strategy. They are hybrids of the visual and the conceptual. This hybridization is itself a hallmark of many postmodern cultural productions, eschewing the boundaries imposed by outmoded discipline-based structures.

Appropriation

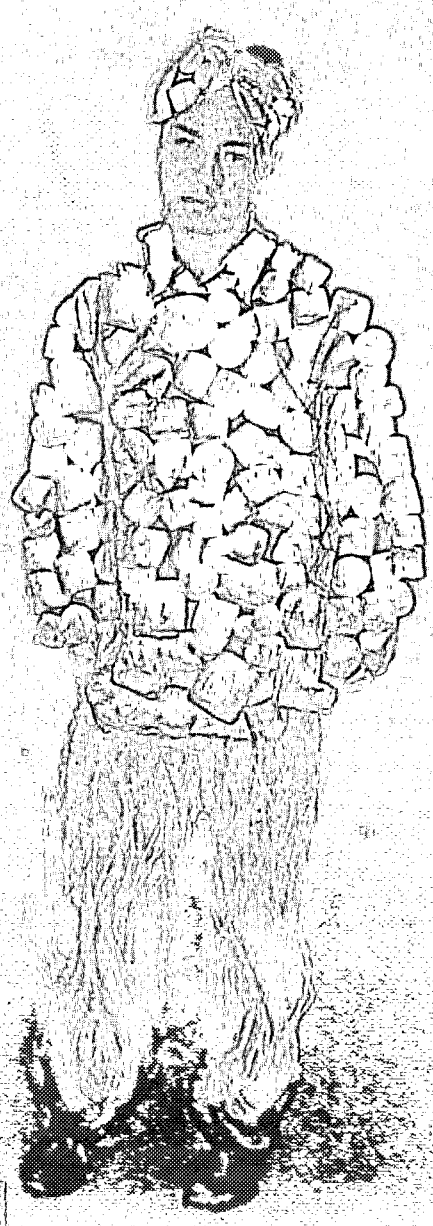
One of the most striking things about many of the curriculum projects was the routine use of appropriated materials. Whether created in the spirit of Romare Bearden's histories of the African-American experience composed of fragments of found photos (Bearden & Henderson, 1993) or Kenny Scharf's *Junkie*, in which painted purple vines entwine on a yellow field of retro insecticide ads (Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1998), the student artwork often used print materials as the stuff out of which their art was composed. For the students, recycling imagery felt comfortable and commonplace. If one lives in a forest, wood will likely become one's medium for creative play. If one grows up in a world filled with cheap, disposable images, they easily become the stuff of one's own creative expression.

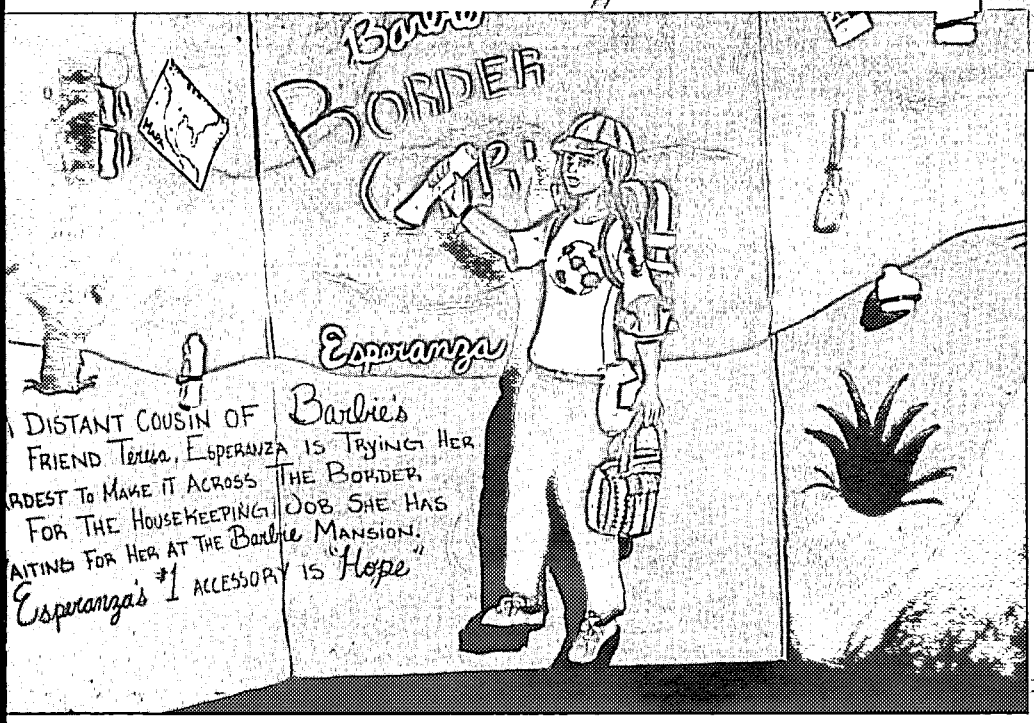
Juxtaposition

Robert Rauschenberg revolutionized expressive painting when he substituted the seemingly random *juxtaposition* of found images for personally generated abstract marks (Forge, 1972). The modernist principle of contrast is not adequate to describe the energy generated by bringing together radically disparate elements, an artistic strategy utilized since Dada photomontage and Surrealist objects such as Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup (Burckhardt & Curiger, 1996). The term *juxtaposition* is useful in helping students discuss the familiar shocks of contemporary life in which images and objects from various realms and sensibilities come together as intentional clashes or random happenings.

Recontextualization

Often, positioning a familiar image in relationship to pictures, symbols, or texts with which it is not usually associated generates meaning in an artwork. Hannah Höch, an early Dada proponent of the new medium of photomontage, created provocative works by recombining found imagery. In *Die Braut* of 1927, winged objects swirl around the central image of a traditional bride and groom. The woman's head is replaced by an oversized image of a young child's face (Makela & Boswell, 1996). This simple visual move changes any potential romantic fantasy readings of the bridal couple, shifting the focus to society's degrading legal, religious, and cultural conventions regarding the status of women.

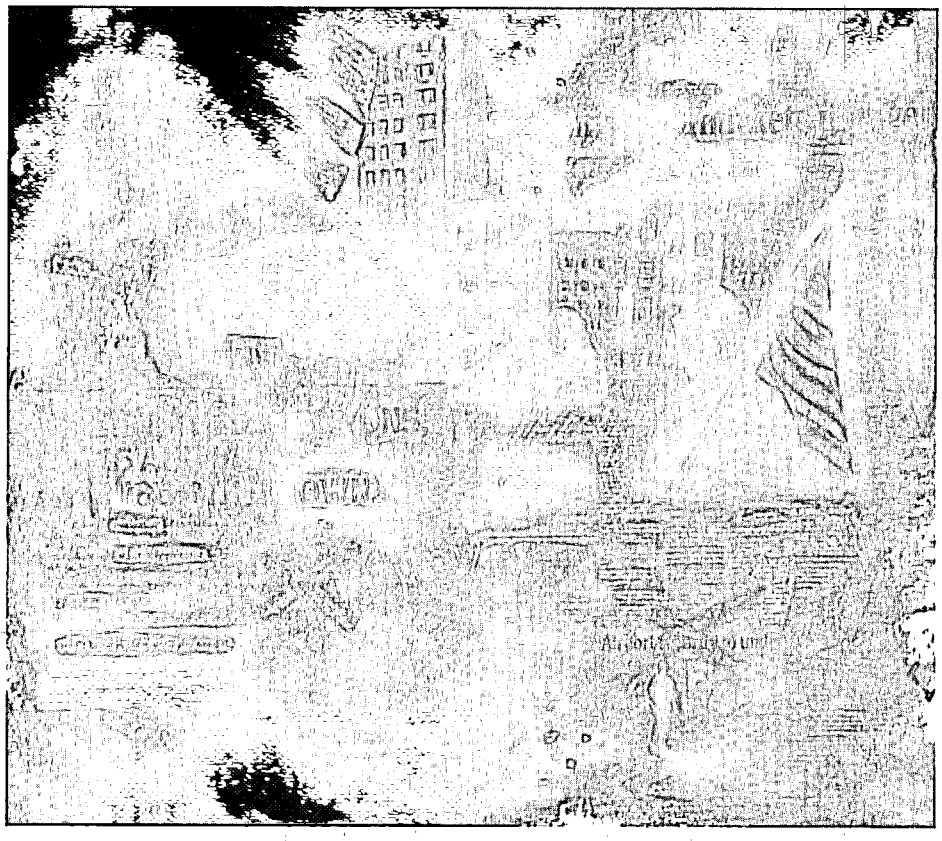




JUXTAPOSITION: Students explored how choice of materials creates meaning in contemporary art by imagining the juxtaposition of non-art materials. Here a teen artist created a psychological self-portrait, *Marshmallows and Fire*, at the Spiral Workshop 1996.

RECONTEXTUALIZATION: The familiar image of a fashionable accessorized Barbie® doll takes on new meaning when recontextualized with the reality of poor Mexican women seeking to come to the United States to find employment. *Border Barbie* by preservice teacher Gina Ibarra for Spiral Workshop 2002.

Photos courtesy of University of Illinois at Chicago.



LAYERING: Students explored their fears and hopes after the tragedy of September 11 by muting and layering images and text onto the headline newspaper pages of those terrible days. *Are You There Yet?* by high school student Kristy Puritun created at Spiral Workshop 2001. Photo courtesy of University of Illinois at Chicago.

Though deconstruction has a more specific meaning in the theory of Jacques Derrida (Glusberg, 1991), in everyday art world parlance, *recontextualization* and deconstruction can often function synonymously. The magazine *Adbusters* has many examples of deconstructing contemporary advertisements by pairing the original ads with fragments of other images and texts that contextualize the consumer fantasies within environmental and global justice discourses.[5]

Layering

As images become cheap and plentiful, they are no longer treated as precious, but instead are often literally piled on top of each other. Layered imagery evoking the complexity of the unconscious mind is a familiar strategy in Surrealist art and of early experimental approaches to photography. In postmodern works by artists such as David Salle, Sigmar Polke, and Adrian Piper, the strategy evokes the layered complexity of contemporary cultural life (Fox, 1987; Grosenick, 2001). Multiple layers of varying transparency will increasingly be a readily available strategy to students because it is a common feature of most digital imaging programs such as Adobe Photoshop® (Freeman, 2001).

Interaction of Text & Image

In a 1990 montage, artist Barbara Kruger paired a photograph of a woman, peering through a magnifying glass, with a greatly enlarged eye, with the text "It's a small world but not if you have to clean it" (Emerson, 1999, p. 127). The text does not describe the work, nor does the image illustrate the text. The interplay between the two elements generates rich and ironic associations about gender, social possibilities, and cleanliness. Students who make and value art in the 21st century must learn not to demand a literal match of verbal and visual signifiers, but rather to explore disjuncture between these modes as a source of meaning and pleasure.

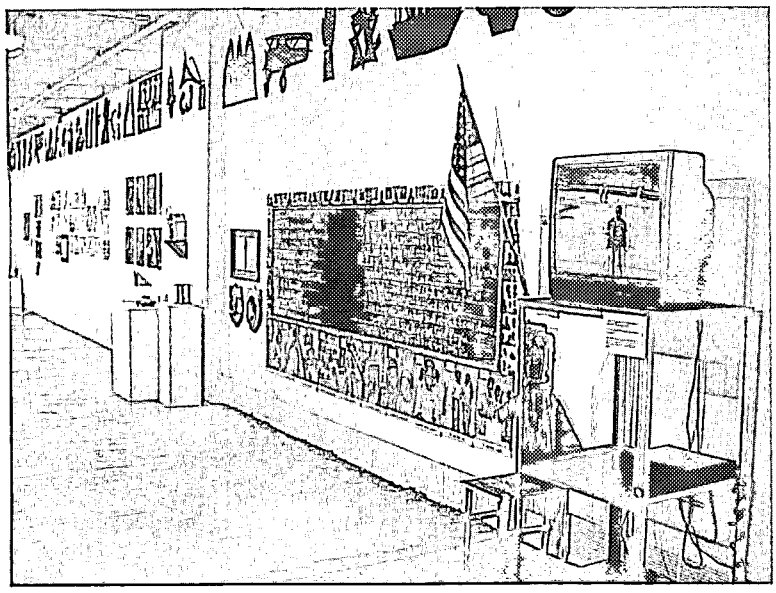
Hybridity

Many contemporary artists incorporate various media into their pieces, using whatever is required to fully investigate the subject. Contemporary artists routinely create sculptural installations utilizing new media such as large-scale projections of video, sound pieces, digital photography, and computer animation. Indeed, multi-media works of art are now encountered in contemporary museums and galleries more frequently than traditional sculpted or painted objects.

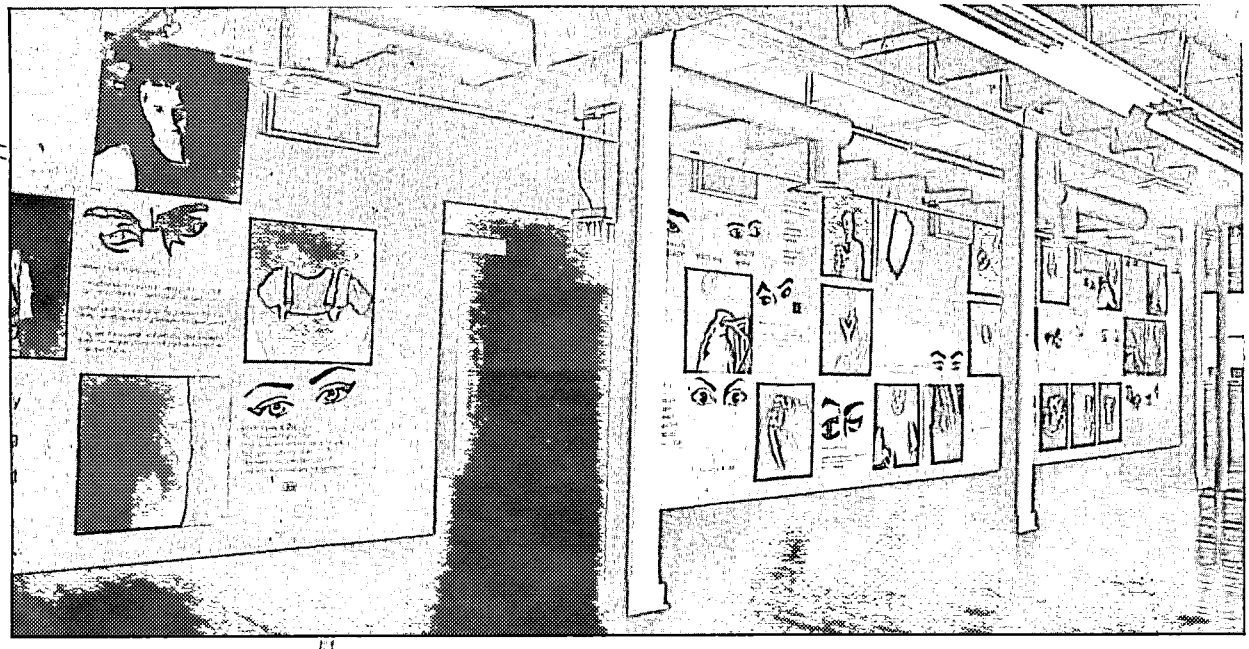
The concept of *hybridity* also describes the cultural blending evident in many works. New York and Tokyo-based Mariko Mori draws on costuming, make-up, popular culture, and traditional Buddhist beliefs to create complex photographic and video installations. Her work explores boundaries between spirituality and cyberculture, between the human and the re-creation of the human through technology (Fineberg, 2000).

Gazing

In Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, the traditional meaning of the saccharine image is challenged when it is presented with an even more stereotypical depiction of a wide-eyed, red-lipped African-American woman holding a broom in one hand and a rifle in the other, juxtposed with a life-size Black Power clenched fist (Broude & Garrard, 1994). By shifting the context within which a familiar advertising image is seen, students spontaneously question who creates and controls imagery and how this imagery affects our understandings of reality—an important activity of visual culture art education.



HYBRIDITY: Art teacher Mathias Schergen led students of Jenner Elementary School in making the 2000 multi-media installation, "Memory Museum," as a tribute to the closing of the old school and the change in the community as gentrification displaced public housing. The installation included arranged found objects and student art and writing as well as video interviews of school and community residents. Photo courtesy of the Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative.

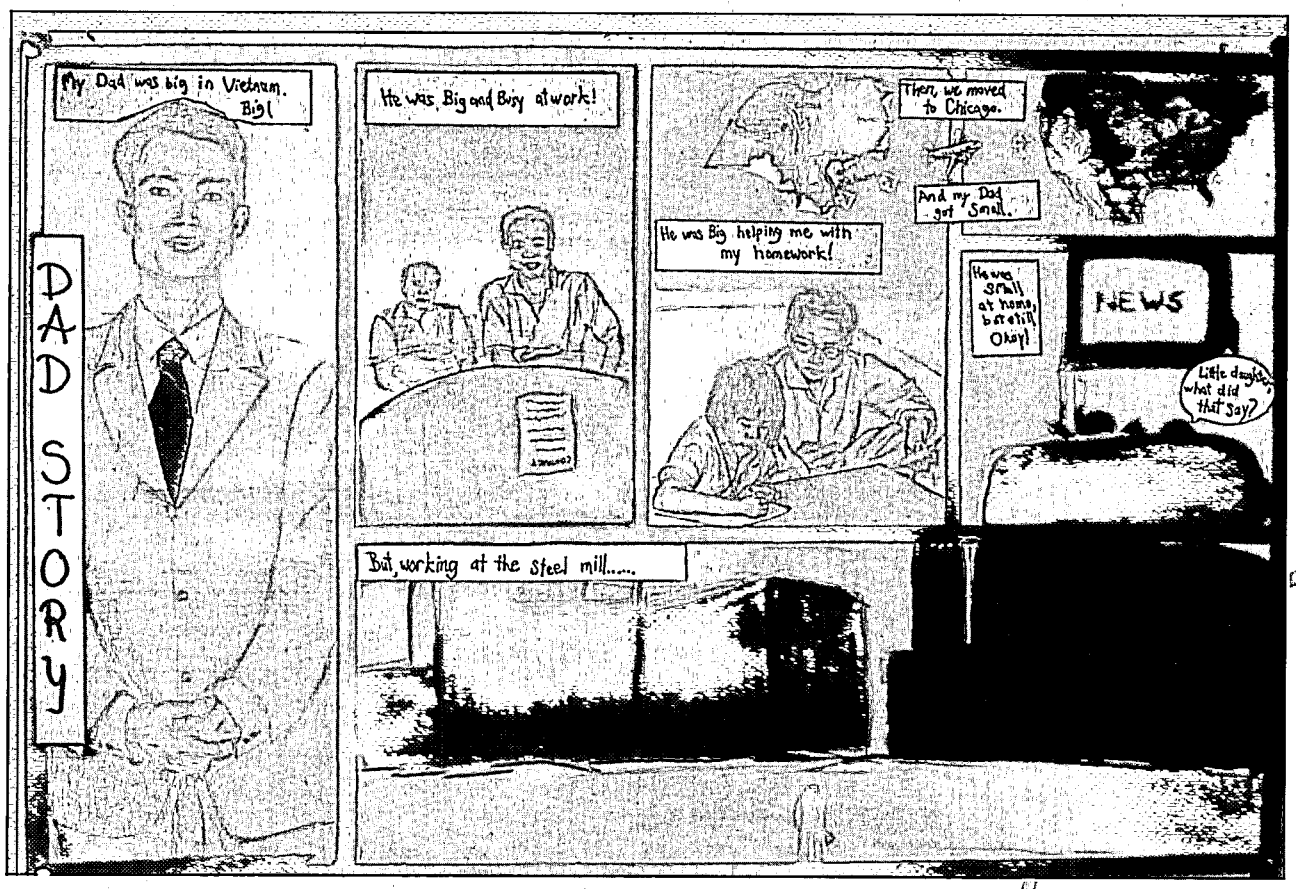


GAZING: Inspired by the risky and sometimes controversial work of contemporary artists, the Spiral Workshop teens and teachers in the Chiaroscuro group made the installation, "When I Look at You I See" in 1998. The text accompanying each portrait described the messages that these urban teens saw reflected in the gaze of adults who look at them and make stereotypical judgments about them. Photo courtesy of University of Illinois at Chicago.

The term *gaze* is frequently used in contemporary discourses to recognize that when talking about the act of looking, it is important to consider who is being looked at and who is doing the looking (Olin, 1996). Gazing, associated with issues of knowledge and pleasure, is also a form of power and of controlling perceptions of what is "real" and "natural." Much critical theory in art history and film studies makes use of the term to investigate how our notions of "others" are constructed through proprietary acts of looking and representing. For example, consider the standard art historical discussion of Gaughin's depiction of Tahitian women in which his Orientalist theories and projections of spirituality, timelessness, and sensuousness determine our perception of the women (Janson, 1968).

Representin'

U.S. urban street slang for proclaiming one's identity and affiliations, *representin'* describes the strategy of locating one's artistic voice within one's own personal history and culture of origin. David Wojnarowicz grounded his art in his experiences as a young, gay man in New York during the emerging AIDS crisis (Scholder, 1999). Tracey Emin makes funky mixed media paintings and objects that investigate all aspects of her life, including crummy jobs, alcohol abuse, and sexuality (Riemschneider & Grosenick, 1999). Shirin Neshat creates video installations and photo text works that explore the psychological conditions of women in Islamic societies (Grosenick, 2001). It is important that art classes provide students with opportunities for



REPRESENTIN':
Making autobiographical comics creates comfortable opportunities for students to represent themselves situated within their families and communities. In a Mixed Media class at Whitney Young High School in Chicago, Haibinh Hguyen created a haunting story about how immigration affects family relationships. Photo courtesy of art teacher, Lisa Wax.

...art examples and projects in school art curricula should not be reductive representations of theoretical principles, but should reflect the complexity of actual art.

meaningful self-expression in which they become *representin'*, self-creating beings. These opportunities should allow students to see examples of contemporary artists using artmaking to explore the potentials and problems inherent in their own cultural and political settings (Gude, 2003).

A Principled Position on the Future of Art Education

The elements and principles of design were never the universal and timeless descriptors they were claimed to be. Indeed, they are not even sufficient to introduce students to most modern art because modernism has always been a tradition with two sharply different manifestations, the "coolly formal" and the often "enraged engaged."

Much art education has been associated with what critic Clement Greenberg referred to as "cold modernism" (1971), focused on artists such as Manet, Seurat, Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso. "Hot modernism," characterized by artists such as Duchamp and the Dadaists, has not been adequately represented in K-12 art discourses despite the fact that such artists are far more likely to be cited as influential to today's artworld.

The list of postmodern principles described in this article is not meant to be exhaustive. The principles were empirically derived from curriculum projects based on contemporary art, developed by a nexus of Chicago area teachers and artists. Further curriculum research will no doubt identify other important postmodern concepts and practices that ought to be considered for inclusion in contemporary art education curricula.

In true postmodern fashion, these principles are not a set of discrete entities, but are rhizomatic. Because these principles overlap and crisscross, the illustrations of professional art and student work provided above often exemplify more than one principle. That's okay; art examples and projects in school art curricula should not be reductive representations of theoretical principles, but should reflect the complexity of actual art.

It can be frustrating and disconcerting to lose the certainty of an earlier time, but I do not think that it is wise to

prematurely smooth away these ambiguities and create a 21st century orthodoxy. I do not hope to see a generation of art education texts that merely add a few postmodern principles such as *juxtaposition* and *appropriation* to their lists of modernist elements and principles and then proceed to use them to structure and justify a curriculum.

A basic tenet of all postmodern theory is a suspicion of totalizing discourses and grand narratives—the belief that there is one right way to organize and understand things. Nevertheless, much contemporary art education has clung to narrowly prescriptive theories, such as *the* elements and principles, *the* four disciplines that ostensibly include all the concepts needed to adequately understand art, or *the* sequence of steps one should always follow in approaching an artwork.

Postmodern thought embraces the heterogeneous, the local, and the specific. It affirms the choice-making capacity of individuals who select from the past those things that will best serve them as starting points for today. These choices will be different in different places depending on the history and present issues of each school community. By structuring art projects to introduce students to relevant contemporary art and thus to postmodern principles—strategies for understanding and making art today—students will gain the skills to participate in and shape contemporary cultural conversations.

Olivia Gude is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Art Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.
E-mail: gude@uic.edu

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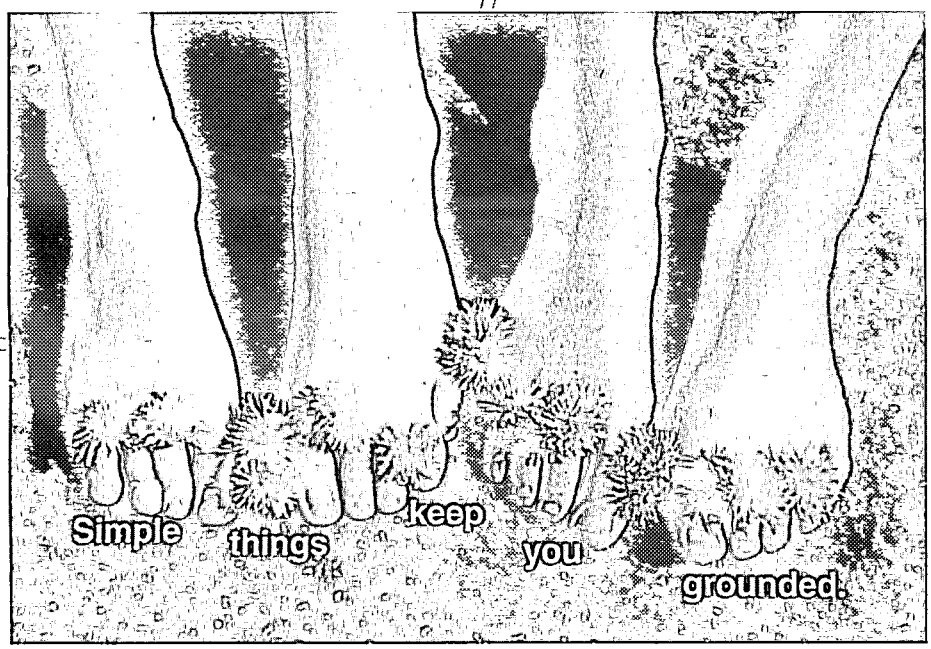

INTERACTION OF TEXT & IMAGE: Students responded to insipid inspirational posters that literally match text and images with playful non-literal pairings of images and words. *Simple Things Keep You Grounded* created in 2000 by Jennifer Bean and Kelly Carlson in response to a project by teacher Dena Cavazos for the Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative. Photo courtesy of University of Illinois at Chicago.

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NOTES

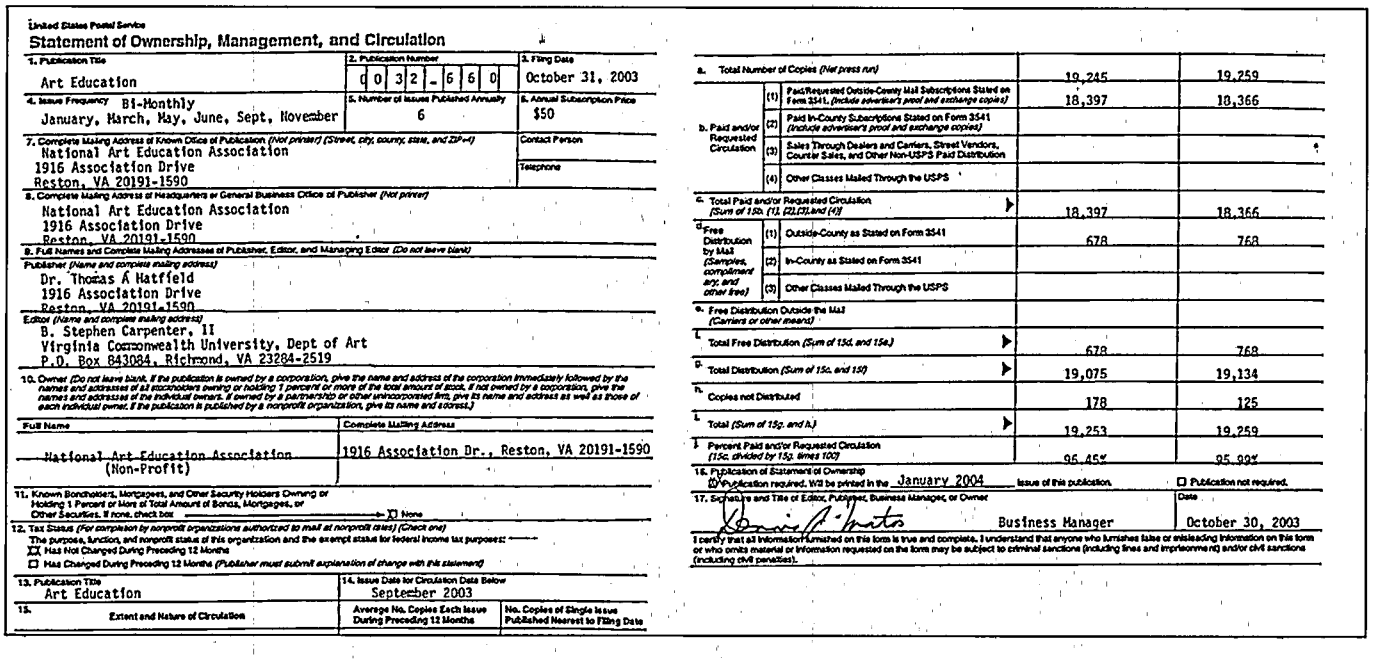
[1]The nomenclature in the 2002 textbook *Art: A Personal Journey* by Eldon Katter and Marilyn G. Stewart is a welcome reversal of this trend. In this book, the elements and principles of *design* are the basis of a single chapter and the dominant organizing strategy for a curriculum is clearly presented in a series of chapters exploring the various roles of artists.

[2]Many authors of art education textbooks have deep and complex understandings of the visual arts that extend far beyond a limited formalist emphasis on the elements and principles of design. Unfortunately, because many texts reiterate nearly identical lists of elements and principles, pairing these with a variety of interesting approaches to studying the social and cultural implications of artworks, some educators have inferred that this common denominator among texts—the lists of elements and principles—represents foundational and universal ideas that are thus more intellectually credible as a basis for curriculum structure than the more subtle and diverse aesthetic or social themes also included in these textbooks.

[3]For information on Spiral theme-based curriculum, visit the Spiral Art Education website: http://spiral.aa.uic.edu

[4]For information on the structure and programming of the Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative, visit the Spiral Art Education website: http://spiral.aa.uic.edu

[5]Back issues of *Adbuster* are available at bulk rates for educators. Their many theme-based issues are a good start for creating visual culture curriculum units. http://www.adbusters.org



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National Art Education Association (Non-Profit)	1916 Association Dr., Reston, VA 20191-1590

11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities. If none, check box → ☒ None

12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates) (Check one)
The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes:
☒ Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months
☐ Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)

13. Publication Title	14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below
Art Education	September 2003

15. Extent and Nature of Circulation		Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)		19,245	19,259
b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation	(1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541. (Include advertiser's proof and exchange copies)	18,397	18,366
	(2) Paid In-County Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 (Include advertiser's proof and exchange copies)		
	(3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution		
	(4) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS		
c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation (Sum of 15b. (1), (2),(3),and (4))		18,397	18,366
d. Free Distribution by Mail (Samples, complimentary, and other free)	(1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541	678	768
	(2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541		
	(3) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS		
e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means)			
f. Total Free Distribution (Sum of 15d. and 15e.)		678	768
g. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c. and 15f)		19,075	19,134
h. Copies not Distributed		178	125
i. Total (Sum of 15g. and h.)		19,253	19,259
j. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation (15c. divided by 15g. times 100)		96.45%	95.99%

16. Publication of Statement of Ownership
☒ Publication required. Will be printed in the January 2004 issue of this publication. ☐ Publication not required.

17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner: Business Manager — Date: October 30, 2003

I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties).

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